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Staging the State: Commemoration, Urban Space and the National Symbolic Order in 1970s Cairo

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Abstract: *This article investigates how commemorating practices are deployed to fix and affirm sovereignty and its ordering. Through conceptualising commemorating practices as ‘national symbolic order’, this article focuses on Cairo’s monument of the Unknown Soldier as a tangled cluster of shifting attempts to signify urban space. Built shortly after the 1973 war, the monument expressed an approach to nationalist symbolism that was in line with how the Sadat regime came into its own because of the war. The article traces the influences on the style of the monument and the narrative of its construction. Ironically, six years later, the same monument became the resting place of Sadat after his assassination on the same site. How is urban space implicated in the construction of a national symbolic order? How is politics as death and mortality navigated and scripted in city space? In answering these questions, the article relies on interviews with the designer of the post-independence Monument of the Unknown Soldier conducted in 2015 and 2016, and his photographic collection. It proceeds in four sections discussing the significance of the October war of 1973 in shoring up the legitimacy of Sadat, imagining the monument, constructing the monument and, finally, the monument’s mediation of death and sovereignty. From the materiality and entanglements of one site, the article analyses ‘state-making’ via ‘city-making’ after 1952 and well into 1970s. Ultimately, it follows the hesitations of deploying a national symbolic order in post-independence Egypt and of attempts at shoring up a shaky state apparatus in a common political space.*

Key words: *Cairo; Memorialisation; Monument of the Unknown Soldier; National symbolic order; Space*

How is urban space implicated in the construction of a national symbolic order? How is politics as death and mortality navigated and scripted in city space? This article investigates how commemorating practices are deployed to fix and affirm sovereignty and its ordering. I answer these questions by focusing on one monument, which I treat as a tangled cluster of recurrent and shifting attempts to signify urban space, that is the Monument of the Unknown Soldier in Cairo. My aim is to demonstrate how one site, in its materiality and entanglements, shows ‘state-making’ via ‘city-making’ after 1952 and specifically well into the 1970s. By thinking about the monument as part of national symbolic order, I argue that this staging of the state is not a fixed stabilisation.

Rather, it is a performance enacted in city space, that is wrought with fragilities and ambivalence.



Figure 1: The Monument of the Unknown Soldier, Nasr City (source: the author 2016).

In the mid-seventies, a monument of the Unknown Soldier was built in the then relatively new neighbourhood of Madinet Nasr [Nasr City, which literally translates as 'the city of victory']. The monument is a hollow pyramid built with concrete and the neighbourhood is now a site of jokes. So overcrowded is it, typically noisy and in a traffic jam, that it is frustrating to get into, out of or through. It is grid-like and grey. It is grey because of its multi-storey apartment blocks, all built with reinforced concrete, and draping themselves with dust and soot year after year. It is assaulted by neon boards that advertise a myriad of shopping stores and centres, and that cladded it in the late 1990s and the 2000s. They etch the neoliberalism of the 1990s in the everyday walks and drives of its people. In this, the monument appears merely as a backdrop to one of many traffic jams (see

Figure 1). The monument belongs to the mid-nineteen seventies. Cairo of the 1970s retains a stronghold as a metaphor for a juncture when (and where) things went wrong, but perhaps it could be productive beyond being a temporal tab of collapse and kitsch in the historicizing of city-politics.

I have turned to the monument, because of its paradoxical monumentality as well as lack of significance in Cairo's present everyday urban landscape. This paradox emerges from what we learn from literature on nationalism, memory and commemoration. The monument of the Unknown Soldier is a key site through which we investigate the 'ghostly' imaginations of the nation.¹ The Unknown Soldier is uncontested. He -typically, it is a he! - is unknown. That is to say, he belongs to the whole nation. His own life is irrelevant since his death gives life to the nation. His anonymity is central to self-identity of the nation. His mortality is scripted into the continuity and immortality of the nation, anchoring the nation's past and future, trauma and victory.² A monument of that sort typically has a productive political purchase.³ Such a magnificent monument this should be, and so politically contested must be the processes of bringing it about that it is almost quite disappointing to look at the one that belongs to Cairo: grey, concrete, rapidly constructed and –in academic terms- hardly studied or written about.

Indeed, one can note how the literature interested in nationalism and commemoration in Egypt typically focuses instead on the statue of *Nahdet Miṣr* [The Renaissance/reawakening of Egypt] that was unveiled in 1928 and sculpted by Mahmoud Mukhtar.⁴ In comparison, *Nahdet Miṣr* is seductive of academic curiosities

¹Benedict Anderson (1991) *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Revised Edition (London: Verso).

²Ibid, pp. 9-12.

³See for example: Laura Wittman (2011) *The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, Modern Mourning, and the Reinvention of the Mystical Body*, Toronto Italian Studies (Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press); and on politics of burials and commemoration: Katherine Verdery (1999) *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies: Reburial and Postsocialist Change*, Harriman Lectures (New York: Columbia University Press), and with relevance to memorialisation, death and security: Charlotte Heath-Kelly (2017) *Death and Security: Memory and Mortality at the Bombsite*, New Approaches to Conflict Analysis (Manchester: Manchester University Press).

⁴See Israel Gershoni and James P. Jankowski (2004) *Commemorating the Nation: Collective Memory, Public Commemoration, and National Identity in Twentieth-Century Egypt*, Chicago Studies on the

since it is enmeshed in the interesting politics of nationalism and anti-colonialism. The 1970s monument is simply dull. Against this, I seek to treat this lack as a productive site from which to come to terms with the overarching contemporary sentiment of the city as a disappointing disaster inherited from the post-independence state.

Furthermore, I argue that by conceptualising these commemorating practices as ‘national symbolic order,’ we are more able to capture this enfolding of the spectacular and eventful within the mundane ordinariness of city space. The ‘National Symbolic’ is Lauren Berlant’s conceptualisation in her analysis of the national fantasy.⁵ It is an understanding of political space as *a tangled cluster* of ‘territorial, linguistic, genetic, legal, experiential space of the nation.’⁶ It refers to discursive practices through which individuals become subjects of a collective and bounded political and historical national space. Through the production of utopian national fantasies, the National Symbolic ‘shore(s) up the *shaky apparatus of the state*,’⁷ and regulates desire and affect ‘through images, narratives, monuments, and sites that circulate through personal/collective consciousness.’⁸ The promises of sovereign collective existence are furnished by the state by suturing atomized spaces, people, territory, spectacles, rituals, and monuments and which accommodate discontinuities, confusions and ambiguities.⁹

Middle East (Chicago: Middle East Documentation Center); Alexandra Dika Seggerman (2014) Mahmoud Mukhtar: ‘The First Sculptor from the Land of Sculpture’, *World Art* 4 (1), pp. 27–46; Beth Baron (2005) *Egypt as a Woman: Nationalism, Gender, and Politics*, 1st ed (Berkeley: University of California Press).

⁵Lauren Gail Berlant (1991) *The Anatomy of National Fantasy: Hawthorne, Utopia, and Everyday Life*. (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press).

⁶Ibid, pp. 5-6, 20-21 emphasis added.

⁷Ibid, p. 21 emphasis added.

⁸Ibid.

⁹ Ibid, pp.21,25 and Lauren Gail Berlant (2011) *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press) p. 23.

Berlant's work, I suggest, turns 'staging the state' into an indeterminate space of interrogation, enabling us to understand practices of sovereignty that are *shaky* and *shored (or shoring)* at the same time, and to take them seriously without falling in the trap of containing them into roles of fixing meaning and representation. Similarly, Charlotte Heath-Kelly deploys an understanding of a symbolic order to disrupt sovereign performances of omnipotence and mastery in face of mortality.¹⁰ By approaching the symbolic order as dynamic, in motion, vulnerable and ambivalent, I am better enabled to invert the glove of sovereign spatial order to see beyond its fixed stabilisations. The national symbolic in terms of memorialisation as well as the imagination of the utopian every day is a key practice within these attempts. In other words, built space, memorial or otherwise, is an embodied, material and spatial performance of a national symbolic order. The city here is not only a theatre or a spectacle of politics, but also the materiality and texture of its space is enmeshed with the co-constitution of political self-hood.

This article relies on interviews with the designer of the post-independence Monument of the Unknown Soldier that I conducted in 2015 and 2016 and his photographic collection. It proceeds in four sections. The first discusses the significance of the October war of 1973 in shoring the legitimacy of Sadat. It is to this war, that the monument was constructed. The three remaining sections recount the story of the monument, which remains curiously largely undiscussed in the literature. Structured around imagining the monument, constructing the monument, and the monuments mediation of death and sovereignty, I depend on interviews with the designer of the monument to bring to light the entangled symbolisms and materialities that were deployed in these practices of commemoration.

The monument was a pyramid constructed by an archetypical Islamic art like calligraphy, and as such, was an embodiment of the shifting politics that Egypt was undergoing at the time. The 1970s memorial as-a-pyramid was a departure from earlier forms of memorialisation that consistently represented Egypt as embodied, and gendered. Therefore, it speaks to the debates on nationalism that Egypt had to navigate at the time. The October 6 War also replaced the 23rd of July –the memory of the Officers' Movement- as the main national commemorative day in the historiography

¹⁰Heath-Kelly, "Death and Security".

of post-independence Egypt. The monument was placed in a utopian space of a newly constructed neighbourhood, and as a culmination of a hesitant realm of the National Symbolic. It attempted to adjudicate neo-pharaonism, Islamic revivalism, militarised space, the martyrs and Sadat himself all at once and thus ended as an over-signified spectacle, a trace of itself. This over-signification culminated with the ultimate ironic twist of fate as Sadat got assassinated in front of the monument, and subsequently was buried beneath it. Ultimately, the monument sheds light on the postcolonial state's capacity and control in shaping the urban spectacle of the capital city as a theatre of politics and mediation of the sovereign and the nation. I weave into this story of 'ability', threads of hesitations, fragilities and failures stemming from the same discursive positions and practices. In short, I follow the hesitations of deploying a national symbolic order in post-independence Egypt, as attempts of *shoring up shaky state apparatus* in a common political space.

Shifting politics and symbolic orders

The 1970s memorial as-a-pyramid was a departure from earlier forms of memorialisation that consistently represented Egypt as embodied and gendered: as a woman. Egypt's national symbolic landscape was long dominated (in city scape as well as the academic literature) by Mukhtar's *Nahdet Miṣr* (1928).¹¹ The sculpture fortifies the long-held trend of representing Egypt as a woman (and as a peasant) and thus embodying the nation. As Israel Gershoni and James Jankowski argue, sculpture as an art was more associated with pharaonic tradition, but 'largely absent from the Egyptian commemorative repertoire in the Arab-Islamic period.'¹² In addition to the genre itself, the statue revealed a neo-pharaonic revival, with its theme--that of the sphinx, as well as its materiality. The Sculpture was unveiled on May 20, 1928, initially located in the square of the railway station. In 1955, it shifted places and moved to *Mīdān al-Jāmi'a*, the Square in front of Cairo University. With the changed place, some argue, also came a shift of signification. The statue that represents a national symbol of the renaissance of Egypt became instead more associated with

¹¹Baron, "Egypt as a Woman"; Gershoni and Jankowski, "Commemorating the Nation".

¹² Gershoni & Jankowski, "Commemorating the Nation", p. 35.

education, knowledge and cultural revival, with a significantly shorter base.¹³ In its stead, a statue of Ramses II was brought from Southern Egypt (where it stayed until its removal in 2006). The square was renamed Ramses Square, and was enlarged and renovated.

The contentious story of this monument is commented on extensively in secondary literature. What I find worthy of noting is using two embodied entities, the sphinx and the peasant, to represent the abstraction of the nation. The case of *Nahdet Miṣr* shows a long and dominant tradition of gendering and embodying the nation in materials like marble, bronze or granite, from which the post-independence monument will be a departure, yet only in the mid-seventies. The new regime of 1952, indeed marked certain changes in the symbolic order of the city-scape in Cairo. For instance, the state changed names of streets and squares and these usually went with processes of scripting symbolic space and sometimes re-signifying it. Several statues of the royal family were removed. If, as Katherine Verdery argues, statues perform ‘as dead people cast in bronze or carved in stone, in a sense they are the body of the person, arresting bodily decay, altering temporality ...like an icon,’¹⁴ then willing the icons of an older regime into absence is only too predictable.

Other dead bodies, however, remained. For instance, the 1952 regime commemorated Mustapha Kamel and Mohammed Farid, national figures and leaders of the national party, and oversaw the construction of their mausoleum and their reburial. The national party campaigned for a mausoleum constructed for Kamel, especially since his family’s tomb in Imam El-Shafi’i cemetery where he was buried was dilapidated. Kamel and Farid were reburied in 1953, during the festival of liberation, and with a second funeral for each that lacked the spontaneous air of the first.¹⁵ Besides that, one of the major first commemorative acts Nasser did after 1952 included Fathy Mahmoud’s sculpture of 1955 commemorating university students who died in the protests of 1935 (Figure 2). Mahmoud was schooled in a French tradition, and like Mukhtar, his mentor and Egypt’s lead sculptor, he continued the

¹³ Ibid, p. 123.

¹⁴ Verdery, “The Political Lives of Dead Bodies”, p. 5.

¹⁵ Gershoni and Jankowski, “Commemorating the Nation”, pp. 53, 87-88, 149-165, 191-92, 209-12.

long tradition of symbolising the nation as a woman. Besides offering a brief overview, my aim in this section is to show a tradition of commemoration was predominantly geared towards embodiment -either statues of people, or more importantly embodying the nation as woman, with emphasis on materiality of bronze or granite. This tradition however will not inform that monument that currently dots the landscape of Nasr City and that has been dedicated and intertwined with the politics of the 1970s, specifically the 1973 war. To the significance of this war in the temporalisation of post-independence Egypt I turn next.



Figure 2: Mahmoud's statue for commemorating the students of Cairo University. Egypt is represented as a woman, in a bronze statue and on the base (source: author 2016).

Complex victory

On sixth of October 1973, Egypt fought, what is until now, its last war with Israel. This war was long awaited by the Egyptians to redress the 1967 military defeat, and was a main reason for student and political activism in the years preceding it. The war also helped consolidate Sadat's shaky legitimacy that was still overshadowed by his predecessor. Cairo celebrates the victory on the October 6 every year. The state has scripted it as the basis of the legitimacy of Sadat as 'the hero of war and peace,' Hosni Mubarak after him as 'the leader of the first air strike' in this war and more

recently for the post-2013 regime. It has acted as the new national holiday. However, this does not mean that it does not hold its own complexities.

Even though I use the term ‘consolidate,’ the scripting of this victory is quite complex. As Alia Mossallam uncovers in her research on popular memory and history, the narratives of victory and defeat not only are contested but also contradictory. Popular resistance in cities overlooking the canal, like Suez, tell a story in which the people resisted the Israeli tanks as Cairo was celebrating victory. In this case, October 6 assumes different and opposed meanings outside of the capital.¹⁶ While it is outside the scope of this article to uncover popular resistance and alternative history, it is crucial to appreciate the layered and multi-sited nature of the narrative with which I deal, to highlight how fragile the victorious narrative is from the start.

Moreover, soon after consolidating his legitimacy with the war, Sadat launched a series of unpopular policies, primarily *Infatih* [the open-door policy].¹⁷ This signified a withdrawal from the social contract that had been established at the beginning of the post-independence state and that focused on development and welfare.¹⁸ *Infatih* effectively was seen as a counter-revolution.¹⁹ Senses of betrayal revolving around the war also include the ambivalent scripting in -and out- of the roles of ordinary Egyptians in the war. The ambivalence of victory for instance can be noted in literature and in film. Yusuf al-Qa‘id’s *al-ḥarb fī bar-Miṣr* [War in the land of Egypt] was written in 1978. In it, a poor Egyptian soldier with a generic name *Maṣri* [Egyptian] goes to the war instead of the son of *al-‘umda*. He dies in the war as Egypt continues to fight its internal wars of inequality and dispossession. A movie based on the novel

¹⁶Alia Mossallam (2012) *Hikāyāt Sha‘b - Stories of Peoplehood: Nasserism, Popular Politics and Songs in Egypt, 1956-1973*, PhD thesis (London: The London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), pp. 206-207.

¹⁷Timothy Mitchell (2002) *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press), p. 211.

¹⁸See Nicola Pratt (2000), Maintaining the Moral Economy: Egyptian State-Labour Relations in an Era of Economic Liberalization, *Arab Studies Journal* 8/9 (2/1), pp. 111–29.

¹⁹Ghali Shukri (1981) *Egypt, Portrait of a President, 1971-1981: The Counter- Revolution in Egypt, Sadat’s Road to Jerusalem*, Middle East Series (London: Zed Press).

called *al-Muwaṭīn Miṣry* [Citizen Miṣry] was released in 1991, and the titles ran with the images of the Monument of the Unknown Soldier in the background. Finally, and more crucially, it was the signing of the peace treaty with Israel in 1979 that helped to shake the position of memory of the war.

Having noted that, October 6 became--and thus far has remained--the main symbolic ground for celebrating the nation and its military. Sadat finally could emerge from the shadow of Nasser and claim the nation's new beginning, thus opening yet another originary moment to the post-independence state. October 6 replaced July 23 --the memory of the Officers' Movement-- as the main national commemorative day; official delegations would visit military cemeteries on October 5, and a military parade-review would occur in Nasr City. With all this in mind, it is not surprising that in 1974, one year after the war, the state decided to announce a competition for the design of a monument to the Unknown Soldier.

Imagining the monument: Symbolic entanglements

On June 4, 1974, the Ministry of Housing announced a competition for proposals for a memorial to the martyrs of the October 1973 War. According to this advertisement, the monument was to symbolise the meanings of 'immortality, honour and victory', and to be placed in *al- Ḥuriyya* (liberty) park

Figure 3: Right: The advertisement of the competition as clipped and scanned by the designer, annotated by date of announcement. The park overlooks the Nile and houses other memorials. It is close to the city centre, Tahrir Square, and is adjacent to the Cairo opera house – which was then an area designated for international exhibitions.²⁰ The winning proposal was one submitted by Sami Rafi' (

Figure 3). Rafi' was not a sculptor, rather he had been academically trained in set design in Vienna. He had not constructed anything of that magnitude before.

According to Rafi', he already had been toying with some ideas for a memorial before the announcement, after seeing a Baghdad memorial to an Unknown Soldier

²⁰The International Exhibition Land is currently in Nasr City and this area has been designated for the new Cairo Opera House. This was to replace Cairo's Opera House that burnt down in the 1970s and in which Sami Rafi', the designer of the monument, had worked.

on TV. Therefore, he had an idea almost ready for submission. What sparked his inspiration was that the Iraqi monument seemed to reference the traditional building material in Mesopotamia. The Iraqi monument was shaped as an arch or a dome- a gesture to traditional building forms that were possible by the predominance of clay and mud brick.²¹ In comparison, Egypt historically had built with stone, resulting in forms like pyramids. Rafi‘ thought that if a similar monument was to be designed for Egypt, it had to be a pyramid.²² When the competition announcement was launched, Rafi‘ reworked his initial ideas and prepared an approximately one meter high maquette for entry (Figure 4, Figure 5).

²¹Baghdad, like Cairo, has several and shifting symbolic-scapes. If this inspiration story is true, then the monument in reference is most likely the Arch of the Unknown Soldier built by Agha Khan winner architect Rifat Chadirji in 1959 (see portfolio of images online at: The official site of Rifat Chadirji <http://www.rifatchadirji.com/jondi-majhool.html> accessed 12 May 2019). The primary reference for this monument, however, is a mother wailing over her son’s dead body. This monument was destroyed in the 1980s and replaced by a statue of Saddam Hussein –the same statue that was demolished in 2003. Alternatively, Rafi‘ mentions in some interviews that the inspiration came simply by having a view of the pyramids from his home. While this discrepancy is not very consequential, the Baghdad influence opens questions about reference since the monument is a hollowed arch, as well as the effect of comparing building material on the form of memorialisation, which is the account that Rafi‘ gave me in our interviews.

²²Sami Rafi‘ -interview, Faculty of Fine Arts, Cairo- 2/8/2015.



Figure 3: Right: The advertisement of the competition as clipped and scanned by the designer, annotated by date of announcement. Left: The Ministry of Housing and Reconstruction's announcement of the winner of the competition on February 26, 1975. Rafi' won first prize (3000 EGP) and the second and third place were divided equally between Architect Medhat Mohamed Saif, and Fathy Mahmoud. The latter had a longer history and expertise in constructing memorials and sculptures. Image collated and annotated by, and courtesy of Sami Rafi'.

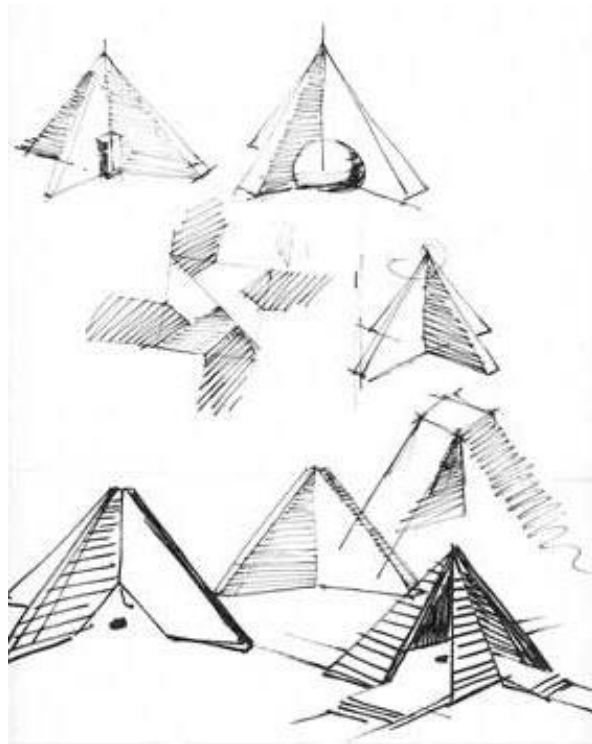


Figure 4: Early sketches of the monument. Courtesy of Sami Rafi'.



Figure 5: Final maquette of the monument approximately a meter-high. Courtesy of Sami Rafi'.

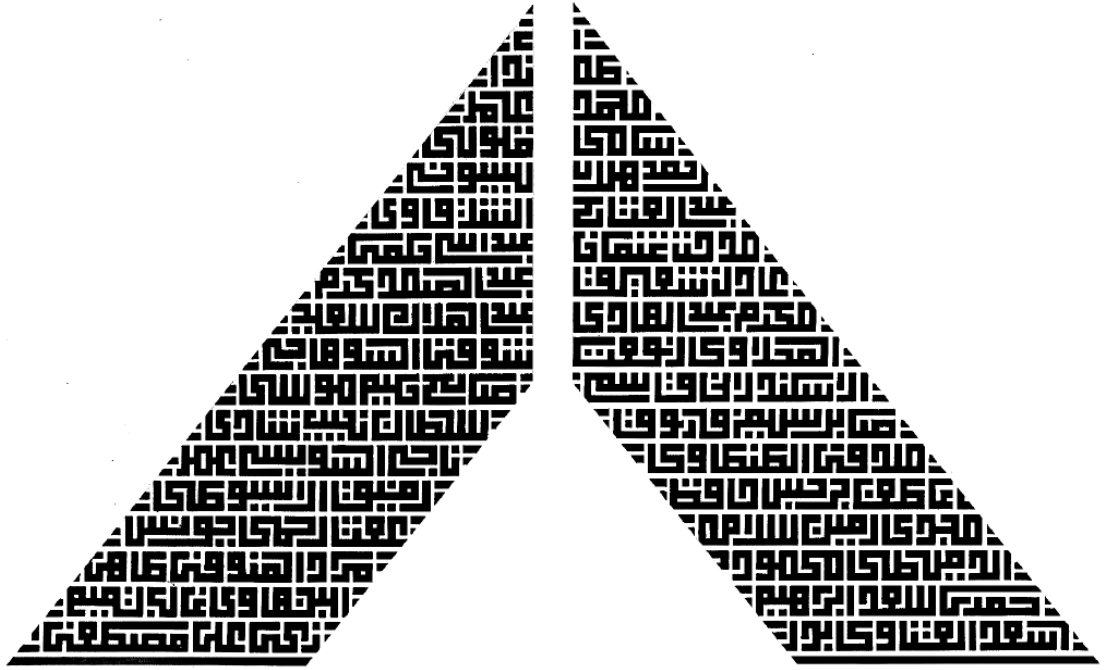


Figure 6: Diagram of the 71 symbolic names of martyrs of the war. Courtsey of Sami Rafi'.

On the surface of the monument are 71 male names. These are fictional and symbolic names of martyrs written in Kufi calligraphy.²³ They were designed to be interlinked, yet readable, and the geometric Kufi style makes the names form the effects of building blocks. Rafi' chose a mix of common Muslim and Coptic names, as well as regional last names: *al-Assiuty, al-Iskandarani...etc.* (Figure 6).²⁴ Even though the monument carries proper names, it retains anonymity by not referring to actual lists of martyrs. As such, I propose, it maintains an element of abstraction, even as its symbolism seeks to refer to territorial integrity as well as religious diversity/unity. The names were designed already in the wooden mould, with

²³Kufi is an angular script, one of the oldest Arabic styles. For a study on its origins, subtypes and development see: Annemarie Schimmel (1990) *Calligraphy and Islamic Culture* (London: Tauris), pp. 1-47.

²⁴Sami Rafi' -interview, Faculty of Fine Arts, Cairo- 4/8/2015.

Styrofoam so they would emerge from the same concrete body of the monument and the whole monument would be uniform in colour.²⁵

A pyramid constructed by an archetypical Islamic art like calligraphy is an almost too convenient- embodiment of the shifting politics that Egypt was undergoing at the time. The 1970s were marked by a revival of neo-pharaonism in literature and intellectual thought, one of the many resonances of the 1967 defeat. However, this revival did not express itself seriously in art or architecture as it did briefly in the 1920s.²⁶ Samah Selim relates this to a nation- state-centric discourse in Egypt as Sadat tried to undo the policies and ideologies of Nasser; it is also related to Egypt's worsening relationships with other Arab countries after the signing of the 1979 peace agreement. Meanwhile, one of the other resonating effects of 1967 was an Islamic revival, in thought as well as in art. Art critic Liliane Karnouk locates Rafi ' to the latter based on his main exhibition in 1974 entitled 'the names of Allah' in which he experimented freely with calligraphic representation of meaning and form.²⁷ Therefore, the monument is a productive entanglement of signs that were competing for the symbolic order of those shifting times, not only because of its representational function, but also because of the process and materiality of its construction.

Constructing the monument: Sadat, Osman and concrete

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶See Samah Selim (2000), *The New Pharaonism: Nationalist Thought and the Egyptian Village Novel, 1967-1977*, *Arab Studies Journal* 8/9 (2/1), pp. 10–24.

²⁷Liliane Karnouk (1995) *Contemporary Egyptian Art* (Cairo, Egypt: American University in Cairo Press), pp. 81-82.



Figure 7: Nasr City in 1975, a photograph taken by Sami Rafi²⁸, in which the spectral presence of the monument yet to come is sketched.

Perhaps no other sign better demonstrates that the monument responded to the contemporary political climate than its swift and politically sanctioned execution. According to Rafi²⁸, he never thought that this memorial would be executed because it was quite often that a competition was called for without going through implementation phases. However, a journalist friend of his, published the image of the proposal, which-allegedly- caught the eye of Sadat. Rafi²⁸ knew for sure that the monument was to be executed when he was called into the office of Osman Ahmed Osman, the business tycoon, the head of the ‘Arab Contractors’ and then the minister of Housing and Reconstruction. Osman Ahmed Osman rose to unparalleled power during Sadat’s years. Initially Osman was a contractor who got his major bids under Nasser, such as for dredging Suez Canal in 1958, but more importantly for the construction of the High Dam. His company, the Arab Contractors was nationalised briefly under Nasser, but Osman kept control over its management. In 1974, Osman became the Minister of Housing and Reconstruction, and in 1979 he became the head of the engineering syndicate.²⁸

²⁸Clement Henry Moore (1994) *Images of Development: Egyptian Engineers in Search of Industry*, 2nd ed. (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press), pp. 174, 178, 187; also see the dedicated chapter

In this meeting, it was agreed that the monument would be executed in Nasr City, in front of the viewing platform where military reviews used to take place, and that it was to be built and ready before October 6, 1975- in around five-month time. The shift of the monumental site, from *al- Huriyya* park in the city-centre to the newly constructed suburb lead to magnifying and enlarging the monument, no longer one among many, to fit the massive avenue, *Tariq al-Nasr* [the avenue of victory] (Figure 7).²⁹ The trajectory of planning and building Nasr City is significant, yet beyond the scope of this article. Nevertheless, it is important to note that as a neighbourhood it represented a residential utopian ambition within the state of post-independence. While it is currently a source of disappointment, as expressed in the opening vignette, Nasr City was a source of pride for the 1952 state. The state's key urban expansion project, it expressed modern ambitions and was showcased as a housing and urban planning achievement during the presidencies of both Nasser and Sadat. Planned as a functional residential and a middle -class neighbourhood, Nasr City had from its earliest inception a military parade and a space for an earlier monument to the unknown soldier, even fifteen years before the present one was built.

The construction of the present monument owes a lot – as do many of the post-independence state achievements-- to the expertise of engineers. Osman Ahmed Osman commissioned 'the Arab Contractors' company to construct the monument, as he confidently communicated to Rafi' when the latter questioned the limited time available for the project. The construction of the monument with that altitude was thanks to reinforced concrete foundations, which made the multiple enlargements of the monument an unproblematic issue between the designer and the engineers even under the pressure of time.³⁰

The controversy came with the choice of the material through which the monument would appear. Rafi' had seen examples of bare concrete in Austria where he did his postgraduate studies and he preferred uniform, bare and textured concrete,

in Raymond William Baker (1990) *Sadat and after: Struggles for Egypt's Political Soul* (London: Tauris), pp. 14-45.

²⁹Sami Rafi' -interview, Faculty of Fine Arts, Cairo- 2/8/2015

³⁰Ibid.

as the sole material for his monument. The construction engineers preferred cladding it with granite (or alternative material such as tiles, mosaics...etc.). Exposed concrete was seen as too base, and unfitting of a monument that is to be inaugurated by the president. Rafi' criticised the engineers' view of concrete as banal and mundane, suitable only 'for sewage and kitchens'. He was primarily concerned with maintenance of a monument high enough to require repeated scaffolding every time the cladding needed restoration. For him concrete was durable, thus aesthetically undisruptive.³¹

Concrete, as Adrian Forty describes, often acts as medium of commemoration, even if it is associated with oblivion. Concrete might seem to lack depth and sophistication; however, it is ubiquitous as commemorative material. One of the reasons concrete is used in memorials, the one that drove Rafi' in my case, is that it is durable. Yet it is to be noted, that concrete is a perfect register for absence, a document about what is not there. Concrete is the product of a negative-positive process, that is, it emerges as set from a pre-constructed mould, that itself documents the exact moment and material of when it was set.³² Rafi' never expressed this directly to me. In his negotiations with the engineers, he argued for concrete by showing how it is textured and patterned, but also how it will not need visible and disruptive maintenance. With the help of another construction engineer on the project, he pointed out how concrete could also accommodate the embossed names without having them eventually falling apart.³³ The positive-negative process brought the absent, abstract, anonymous 71 male names into existence.

Work on the memorial started on May 25, 1975, and ended on the September 15, 1975. It was inaugurated on October 6, 1975. It is 33.64 meters high, the four

³¹Sami Rafi' -interview, Faculty of Fine Arts, Cairo- 4/8/2015.

³²Adrian Forty (2012) *Concrete and Culture: A Material History* (London: Reaktion), pp. 22, 97, 197, 202, 254.

³³Sami Rafi' -interview, Faculty of Fine Arts, Cairo- 4/8/2015.

walls are 1.9 meters thick, and 14.30 meters at base.³⁴ A Pyramid reaches out from a popular base into an abstract and vanishing elevation. It is left hollow to lighten the weight of the concrete mass and to allow for air and light to sweep through.³⁵ A pyramid, indeed, remains Egypt's primary symbolic tomb, a house for (im)mortality.

'There is a magnificence to national existence: the experience of being utopian.'³⁶ The National Symbolic, according to Berlant, weaves in the spectacular with the everyday, and a monument's function is to eclipse the battle and project a social and material fact to the future by responding to the subjects' desire to feel infinite through being abstract in a collective self-transcendence.³⁷ The monument was already placed in a utopian space of a newly constructed neighbourhood, and as a culmination of a hesitant realm of the National Symbolic. It attempted to adjudicate neo-pharaonism, Islamic revivalism, militarized space, the martyrs and Sadat himself all at once and thus ended as an over-signified spectacle, a trace of itself.

Death, sovereignty and the city

*A ground and air parade all at once: a rare sight,
not likely to happen again...*

*...The army units go by and so does time. I start to
feel lethargic and sleepy. Then suddenly I wake up
at a strange point of time. History and time corner
me, saying: That is how the events you skimmed
through in history books took place. And now it's*

³⁴Maha Abdul-Rahman (2015) *Al-Fanān Sami Rafi' Wa Al-Fan Al-Jamāhīry* [Sami Rafi' and art for the masses], Afāq Al-Fan Al-Tashkīly series no. 32 (Cairo: al-hay'a al-'āma li-qusūr al-thaqāfa), pp. 53-55.

³⁵Hussein Bikar (2012) Dars fī al-balāgha [A Lesson in Eloquence], *Al-Akhbar*, 14/3/1975 reprinted in Sami Rafi' (ed.), *Sami Rafi' min khilāl al-funūn al-tashkīliyya al-mutašila bil-jamāhīr* [Sami Rafi' through mass fine arts] (Cairo: Print House), pp. 37-38.

³⁶Berlant, "The Anatomy of National Fantasy", p. 191.

³⁷Ibid.

*happening right here in the living room. The television screen becomes blurred and an unusual commotion follows: voices are heard and then a blackout.*³⁸

On October the 6, 1981, Sadat was assassinated among his fellow military men while reviewing the military in Nasr City. The parade was a yearly commemoration of the sixth of October war and thus the assassination was caught on television- or rather, caught within the television's blackout. Since only a month earlier Sadat had launched a campaign of political arrests, his assassination-- surprising as it was-- must have raised ambivalent sentiments among Egyptians,³⁹ at least this is how the day of his death is depicted in Mahfouz's 1985 novel *Yaum Maqtal al-Za'im*, from which this section's epigraph is taken.

³⁸Najīb Maḥfūz (2008) *The Day the Leader Was Killed* (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group), p. 89.

³⁹ Shukri writing a separate preface to his book on Sadat, indeed announces that '[d]eath was the Egyptian people's verdict on the whole regime'. See Shukri, "Egypt, Portrait of a President", p. iv.



Figure 8: Caricature by Mustapha Hussein, Front cover, *Akhbar El Yom* 10/10/1981 (author's collection).

Seeing and writing with American eyes in mind, Raymond Baker, puzzles at a paradox: Sadat's assassination was met with 'disconcerting quiet'.⁴⁰ Americans, Baker writes, expected an outpouring of grief. Only a decade earlier with the death of Nasser the people poured into the streets.⁴¹ Traumatized once by the 1967 defeat, the Egyptians had to take to the streets again to deal with a second trauma and the actual death of Nasser in 1970. An estimated five million flooded the streets of Cairo to mourn Nasser,⁴² making his funeral one of the largest popular funerals, comparable only to Egypt's mega star Um-Kalthoum's in 1975. The iconic images and footage of the funeral not only shows streets being flooded by people, but also mourners attached

⁴⁰Baker, "Sadat and after", p. 2.

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²BBC (1970) 1970: Mourners Killed as Nasser Is Buried. (October 1) http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/october/1/newsid_2485000/2485899.stm, accessed 12 May 2019.

to the infrastructure of the city. The most widely circulated images show mourners on light poles, lampposts, and utility poles.⁴³

Despite the popularity of Nasser, his architectural commemoration is curiously obscure. Nasser was buried in a mosque that he himself had overseen its construction in 1962. In 1971, there was a competition for construction of the mausoleum, in which architect Hassan Fathy was involved. Fathy designed a Mausoleum for Nasser,⁴⁴ but he was asked to act as the Jury of the competition.⁴⁵ In a note to the head of the jury, he explained his vision of what the mausoleum should be. The memorial complex, he thought, would be a model to be followed by other Arab countries, therefore, it should symbolise 'the authentic Egyptian personality' and as such it should depart from modern and abstract styles 'so-called internationalist.' The mausoleum should reflect an 'Arab contemporary character.' The difficulty was that the complex had diverse architectural elements, a modern neo-Islamic mosque and an Italian renaissance building. Fathy opted for concealing the Italian building within a museum, and thus museumise the building and its style as a historic relic from colonialism.⁴⁶

⁴³For images and videos of the funeral, see: Ahram Online (2013) Nasser's: The Largest Funeral in Egyptian History. (September 28). Available online at: <http://english.ahram.org/eg/UI/Front/MultimediaInner.aspx?NewsContentID=82636&newsportalname=Multimedia>, accessed 12 May 2019.

⁴⁴Hassan Fathy (1971), Gamal Abdel Nasser Mausoleum (Facade Perspective), 1971, HF 71.02 A 102 Y. Hassan Fathy's Collection in RAC AUC RBSCL. Available online at: <http://dar.aucegypt.edu/handle/10526/1163>, accessed 12 May 2019.

⁴⁵Hassan Fathy (1971) Correspondence regarding the competition for the shrine of Gamal Abdel Nasser (21 March) Hassan Fathy Archives. Aga Khan Trust for Culture. Geneva, Switzerland. Available online at: <https://archnet.org/sites/863/publications/6629>, accessed 8 February 2018.

⁴⁶Hassan Fathy (1971) Memorandum regarding the architectural competition for Gamal Abdel Nasser's Mosque and Shrine (27 March) Hassan Fathy Archives. Aga Khan Trust for Culture. Geneva, Switzerland. Available online at: <https://archnet.org/sites/863/publications/6630>, accessed 8 February 2018.

In comparison, the streets were unusually empty after Sadat's assassination.⁴⁷ Al-Ahram's headline on October 8 ran: 'A mournful pulse of the Egyptian street,' a headline that reported empty streets in major cities like Cairo and Alexandria.⁴⁸ Sadat's funeral was a formal one attended by politicians, rather than a popular one like the streets of the city has seen with the death of Nasser. After Sadat's assassination, his wife, Jehan El-Sadat, decided to have him buried under the Monument of the Unknown Soldier,⁴⁹ henceforth unknown no more. The spectacle of sovereignty and nationhood thus ended with over-signification, with Sadat's body occupying the grave of the nation after his assassination in front of it. The inhabitant of the monument is now contested, controversial and political. In a prophetic move, the pharaoh --as his assassins preferred to describe him-- indeed got his own pyramid, foreclosing very rapidly a political glitch. With the assassination of Sadat, emergency laws were put in effect, which continued to dominate the political life of Egypt during the Mubarak years, military reviews in front of the monument in Nasr City stopped and celebrating October 6 took place elsewhere.

Much has been written comparing and contrasting Nasser and Sadat in terms of history, comparative politics and political economy.⁵⁰ This literature stresses

⁴⁷Al-Ahram, 9 October 1981.

⁴⁸Al-Ahram, 8 October 1981.

⁴⁹Sami Rafi'-interview, Faculty of Fine Arts, Cairo- 4/8/2015.

⁵⁰See for example Baker, "Sadat and after"; John Waterbury (1983) *The Egypt of Nasser and Sadat: The Political Economy of Two Regimes*, Princeton Studies on the Near East (Princeton; Guildford: Princeton University Press); Raymond A. Hinnebusch (1981) *Egypt under Sadat: Elites, Power Structure, and Political Change in a Post-Populist State*, *Social Problems*, 28 (4), pp. 442–64; Raymond A. Hinnebusch (1988) *Egyptian Politics under Sadat: The Post-Populist Development of an Authoritarian-Modernizing State*, Updated edition (Boulder ; London: Reinner); Joel Gordon (1992), *Nasser's Blessed Movement: Egypt's Free Officers and the July Revolution*, Studies in Middle Eastern History (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press); Sherief Younis (2012) *Nidā' Al-Sha'b: Tārīkh Naqdī Lil-Aydiūlūjīyā Al-Nāṣirīyah* [*The Call of the People: A Critical History of the Nasserist*

continuities and/or changes in terms of policies and politics, and these in turn typically are used to explain Baker's puzzlement at the contrasting differences between the appearance of people in the streets in 1970 to bid Nasser farewell, and the withdrawal of people from the streets in 1981. Typically missed from focus, is the spatiality that underlies this appearance and disappearance of the people, as well as the speed, and concreteness through which political interruptions are mediated through architecture.

As Heath-Kelly argues, 'death and place are intersections between subjectivity and the world'.⁵¹ Mortality disrupts the performance of sovereignty, and when it is spatially embodied and visible as destroyed space, it exposes a disruption of the symbolic order that co-constitutes sovereignty and subjectivity. Architecture hence is called upon to 'absorb the resonance of death', (potentially) to foreclose political trauma.⁵² Therefore, we can argue, built space, memorial or otherwise is an embodied, material, spatial performance of a national symbolic order. The city here is not only a theatre or a spectacle of politics, although it certainly is, but also the materiality and texture of its space is enmeshed with the co-constitution of political self-hood. While, our contemporary understandings of power-following Foucault--do away with the sovereign's head, this article still does not hide it, and in fact, in this article I 'paraded' Egypt's sovereign into his burial.

Conclusion

If we take Berlant's argument that the utopian magnificence of the national symbolic holds a fantasy that weaves the national image with the intimate daily lives of the nation's subjects, then we could discern that this fantasy plays out during acute legitimization crises when that emancipatory promise fails. One crucial way this magnificent promise of life and its accompanying shocks and disappointments have been mediated in post-independence Egypt is through the prism of building, metaphorically and literally. Space's materiality, concrete in this case, helps orient to ways the state attempted to order its space. This orients to shifting modes through

Ideology] (Madīnat Naṣr, al-Qāhirah: Dār al-Shurūq); Nazih M. Ayubi (1995) *Over-Stating the Arab State: Politics and Society in the Middle East* (London: I. B. Tauris).

⁵¹ Heath-Kelly, "Death and Security", p. 124.

⁵² Ibid, pp. 124-125, 132, and 150.

which the commemorative and symbolic order was to be enacted, aesthetically, and in terms of location within the city.

I have shown how the state of post-independence relied on engineers and construction to showcase its achievements. I have also shown how these ‘abilities’ are contingent and incomplete. Consequently, the state’s navigation of military defeat and victory becomes a more complex narrative when interwoven with the contradictory life-giving and life-taking politics of space. How else can one understand the scripting of the death of a nameless citizen into the victory of the state?; or the scripting of the death of Sadat in the memorialisation of military victory?

The city (and its streets) are not a theatre on which ‘the people appear’ and politics is played out; rather it is also embedded, enmeshed and co-constitutive in what we come to regard as the spectacle of politics. One way this article has highlighted this is through understanding death and space, and the multiple registers through which a symbolic order of the nation is deployed to anticipate utopian fantasies of modernity, or to foreclose turbulences in the enactment of sovereignty. Even though stressing ‘order’, ‘absorbing resonance’, and ‘foreclosure’ might suggest that deploying that symbolic order expresses ability and completeness, whereby death, mortality and crisis are seen as ‘glitches’ or exceptions to be fixed and smoothed over. My intention is quite the opposite. Through looking into the ways solidity, concreteness and construction- that is processes of putting together the city- enact symbolic and liveable horizon, I aimed to show how this deployment is also wrought with fragility and vulnerability, and is an always incomplete attempt to *shore up the shaky state apparatus*. In this case, it was shoring this shaky apparatus in concrete.

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